COUNTERHISTORY IN THE LITERATURE OF JUÁREZ

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Abstract

Counterhistory in the Literature of Juárez deals with three novels portraying a series of unsolved murders in the city of Juárez, Mexico, including Stella Pope Duarte's *If I Die in Juárez*, Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, and Roberto Bolano's *2666*. The author argues that each novel creates an alternate historical record of the murders, as well as conditions in the city at large, which counters the understanding of the crimes which has been imposed by hegemonic forces in the Mexican and American governments. Because of their oppositional tactics, the author terms all three novels counterhistories, a word with complex and sometimes contradictory meanings in both literary criticism and metahistorical thought. The author explores various ideas of counterhistory and documents the ways each novel fulfills a counterhistorical purpose, as well as the ways in which the unique qualities of the novelistic form empower the creation of oppositional and polemical meanings.

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Introduction

Starting in 1993, local activists drew attention to a set of unsolved murders in Juárez, Mexico, a city bordering El Paso in the state of Chihuahua. By 1997, according to the activist group Ocho de Marzo, more than 100 women's bodies had been found, many showing signs of kidnapping, torture, or sexual mutilation (qtd. in Gaspar de Alba and Guzman 296). Accounts of the number of killings and the connections between the crimes vary for several reasons, most notably sloppy record-keeping and haphazard investigation by state and local authorities. Moreover, the number of women from the region who disappeared but were never found dead is much higher than even unofficial tallies of the victims. In 1995, an Egyptian chemist named Abdel Latif Sharif Sharif was arrested and accused of the killings. When bodies of women continued to turn up, the authorities claimed Sharif was masterminding the crimes from within prison, eventually arresting the members of a gang called Los Rebeldes whom investigators said Sharif had paid to continue killing women, thereby making him appear innocent.

A group of bus drivers known as *Los Choferes* was arrested in 1999, but the body count continued to rise. Most dramatically, eight dead women were found in a cotton field in 2001. By this time the American media had begun paying increasing attention to the killings, culminating in a 2003 report by Amnesty International charging that widespread incompetence and corruption in the police force, combined with a larger pattern of anti-female violence and

discrimination, had resulted in impunity for the murderers of more than three hundred women. The report also detailed investigational abuses, including major judicial irregularities and allegations of torture. The death toll passed four hundred during 2006 when the outgoing federal government returned fourteen cases to authorities in Chihuahua, further delaying a meaningful investigation (Fishburn-Clark).

The situation became dramatically worse in 2008. Levels of drug violence skyrocketed after the election of President Felipe Calderón, in what some officials believed was an attempt to intimidate his administration. Calderón sent the Mexican Army into Juárez to fight the cartels, resulting in a dramatic spike in the city's murder rate – between 2008 and 2009, more than 1600 people died there (Bowden 234). As of this writing, the numbers show no sign of improving. In 2010 about 11,000 people died in drug violence across Mexico overall, and if Juárez's home state of Chihuahua "were an independent country, it would have the dubious honor of having the world's highest homicide rate" (Casas-Zamora).

One way or another, there was certainly always a connection of some sort between the cartels and the femicides (or *femicidios*, the name given by activists to the phenomenon). Most broadly, the history of the cartels was intertwined closely with the history of bribery and corruption in Juárez. The *narcos* had spent decades building close financial and personal ties with the same police department that many activists said was providing impunity for the killings. Several theories about the murders also implicated drug gangs in more specific

ways. Speaking anonymously, a former drug smuggler told the *Dallas Morning News* that the cartels murdered women as a way of celebrating the movement of a large shipment across the border (Rodriguez, Montané and Pulitzer 256). The *El Paso Times* quoted sources saying that drug gangs performed some of the killings as a postscript to lavish orgies; the men responsible "cross the border regularly, are involved in major businesses, are associates of drug cartels and have ties to politicians in President Vicente Fox's administration" (qtd. in Rodriguez, Montané and Pulitzer 225).

Understandably but regrettably, the explosion of drug violence in 2008 diverted the attention of media and political authorities – both within Mexico and internationally – away from the femicides. After all, the drug war was occurring on a much larger scale and drug violence seemed more likely than femicide to spill over the border. Many observers already believed the U.S. to be affected by and morally implicated in the femicides; some commentators had pointed to post-NAFTA economic conditions as setting a stage on which the femicides could flourish, and several of the murdered women were U.S. citizens visiting Juárez. But the U.S.'s role in the drug violence was evident even to casual observers since it provided a market for the cartel's drugs and many of the weapons used in their conflicts.

The drug violence also created a new form of event that could be called femicide, raising the question of which types of violence should be of the greatest concern to activists. As Kathleen Staudt and Irasema Coronado ask, "Where was

the outrage of feminist and antiviolence organizations when a high-ranking police officer who happened to be a female was gunned down in her home in front of her children or when a pregnant twenty-four-year-old died after witnessing the violent deaths of three men who were sitting outside her home?" (157). In the drug war, "activists have been silenced because the victims are seen as less worthy or as 'bad people' who are involved in high-stakes activities that may result in loss of life" (158).

Unfortunately, the rise in drug violence and the dilemmas it posed for activists (along with the inconvenience of working in a city that is essentially at war) came at a time when some observers already believed the activism around the femicides to be declining. Melissa Wright quotes a personal communication from 2007 in which Esther Chavez Cano, director of the women's shelter Casa Amiga, says, "This silence terrifies me. No one is protesting. There are no press conferences. No marches. It's like we're back in 1993" (209). Wright blames the silence on several factors, most prominently splits between various wings of the antifemicide coalition based on disagreements over ideology and competition for resources, along with a move by some groups toward a regionally-based approach.

Some observers also argued that the femicide and drug violence were part of a larger phenomenon, stemming from the same governmental corruption and incompetence. Charles Bowden, a journalist who has visited Juárez for upwards of two decades and written several books about the negative effects globalization

and the drug war wrought upon the city, believes that the majority of the murdered women were "victims of husbands and lovers and hardly mysterious cases" (13). Molly Molloy, who tracked casualty statistics for Bowden and for a project with Yale student Erin Frey, takes a similar tack in contesting Clara Rojas, who asserted that the explosion of drug violence resulted from the femicides. Rojas believed that impunity for the murders "sent a signal to the drug cartels and other thugs that Mexico is 'fertile ground' for criminal activity" (qtd. in Molloy 1). But Molloy cited statistics showing that, during the period during which the femicides occurred, Juárez had a higher male-to-female ratio in its pool of murder victims than comparably-sized American cities, and that the rate of impunity for all crimes in the city was ninety-nine percent. In Molloy's view, scholarship around the question has "focused so exclusively on the women that it has obscured the knowledge of the fate of many other victims" (1).

These arguments have their merits, especially Molloy's point that the male victims of violence in Juárez should also be acknowledged. But the fact remains that more than 600 women have died, many in circumstances involving horrific sexual mutilation, that their families have had no form of closure, and that it is now unlikely that justice will ever occur for the victims. Certainly it was always unlikely that the femicides would ever be truly solved, particularly those which occurred prior to the wave of attention in the early 2000s. As Rodriguez, Montané and Pulitzer point out, evidence in the early cases was collected by a police department in which "officers lacked even the most basic tools – equipment such

as paper bags, latex gloves, and crime scene tape" (102). State case files were sold to criminal suspects or burned for warmth by homeless men. In many instances the bodies of victims were not even properly identified, and many family members remain uncertain to this day whether the grave they visit contains the remains of the person they mourn (Rodriguez, Montané and Pulitzer 273-4). And if the femicides are a question of large-scale social dysfunction, as opposed to the work of an individual or group of individuals, if the Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos is correct in saying that the root of the situation lies in "the extreme vulnerability of women… within a context of economic liberalization and consequent deterioration of the social fabric… exacerbated by the prevalence of discrimination and indifference" (qtd. in Rodriguez, Montané and Pulitzer 293), then catching future murderers will not bring justice or closure to older killings.

This is not to imply that the question of individual responsibility is not an important one or that, in an ideal world, specific perpetrators would not be connected to the deaths of specific victims and punished accordingly. But by many of the understandings constructed for them, the femicides rest in an unpleasant liminal space between the narrative of the serial killer and the narrative of genocide. They are too large to be pinned on an individual but, lacking the overt institutional connection of an event like the Holocaust or Apartheid, they cannot reach closure through political shifts. Small wonder then that the rallying cry of the anti-femicide movement became "Ni una mas!": an appeal to change in

the future, not resolution in the past. Yet, according to Casa Amiga, 39 dead women were found in the first half of 2009 alone – the most recent period for which statistics were available as of this writing – and the overall number of femicides is currently upward of 600 (qtd. in Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 297). In a situation where, as Jane Caputi and Diana E. H. Russell assert, any woman's death is the end result of "a continuum of antifemale terror" rooted in deep traditions of patriarchal misogyny (qtd. in Gaspar de Alba, "Poor Brown Female" 83), into which is thrown an exponential increase in lawless violence, it seems as though the crimes will remain an open wound on the border, one more instance of Gloria Anzaldua's oft-cited "*herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again" (25).

In this vacuum of meaning and resolution, one way of achieving understanding of the crimes is through fictional narratives in films and novels. This thesis addresses three novels which are set in Juárez during the time when the murders first came to light, and published between 2003 and 2008: Stella Pope Duarte's *If I Die in Juárez*, Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*. All three tell stories which are ontologically fictional, yet each novel makes statements about the crimes and their relationship to socioeconomic conditions in Juárez which seek the authority of history. In treating fiction within the realm of history, I point to a perspective outlined by the metahistorian Dominick LaCapra:

> One might argue that narratives in fiction may also involve truth

> claims on a structural or general level by providing insight into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust, by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible "feel" for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods (13).

Instead of constructing a binary between "real" and "fictional," LaCapra sets up a continuum in which "correspondence itself is not to be understood in terms of positivism or essentialism, but as a metaphor that signals a referential relation (or truth claim) that is more or less direct or indirect" (14).

LaCapra's analysis focuses particularly on literature documenting historical traumas such as slavery and the Holocaust since those events are connected to large-scale social and systemic forces which can be accurately reconstructed and explored in fictional events and individuals. LaCapra uses the example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in which Sethe and the characters around her may be fictional, but Morrison's argument about the psychological debasements of slavery seeks to be understood as true. Further, Morrison is not just commenting about the broad idea of slavery but about slavery in a specific society at a specific time. So LaCapra argues *Beloved* may be read and evaluated as a historical text, one which makes a claim of indirect truth relative to its subject. In the same sense, each of the novels I analyze uses fictional characters to explore the real conditions of social and systemic oppression in a specific place and time; they construct a gapless and emotionally compelling truth from a set of

resources whose meagerness may frustrate journalism and nonfiction.

However, while Morrison was writing for an audience which acknowledged the evil of slavery – if not fully understood it – the three novelists I analyze wrote at a time when much of the American public was unaware of the murders in Juárez, and much of the Mexican public blamed the victims. In response to the first wave of attention to the crimes, official statements of the governments of Juárez and Mexico (along with much of the conventional wisdom around the victims) attempted to create a history that was disrespectful of human rights and friendly to entrenched structures of political and social repression. As the report by Amnesty International points out, even in 2003 – a decade after the killings first came to light, and contemporary with the publication of *2666* – President Vicente Fox "believed that the murders and abductions of women were an isolated phenomenon and did not acknowledge that these cases reflected serious deficiencies in human rights protection within Mexico" (2).Even ostensibly positive actions by the government often engaged in discourse that demeaned the victims. For instance, María Socorro Tabuenca Cordóba analyzes a poster designed to help women protect themselves from violence and finds that it propagates the stereotype that, in the words of former assistant attorney general Jorge Lopez Molinar, "All the victims were mischief makers or even prostitutes" (qtd. in Tabuenca Cordóba 100). Rodriguez, Montané, and Pulitzer note surveys in which "local citizens still pointed a finger at the victims for bringing on the attacks" as evidence that "the government's campaign to undermine the reputation

of the victims had been extremely effective at swaying public opinion" (250). It seems to me that much of what has infuriated activists about the femicides – in comparison with the much larger number of murders of men – is the way in which the government exercised ideological control over public understanding of the killings. It is this ideological control, which stems from and reinforces larger social dysfunctions, which the histories I address seek to break.

Since the novels deal with events that are historical (albeit recent) but unresolved, and approach these events in a way that seeks to overturn dominant power structures and paradigms, I argue that they function as counterhistories. The term counterhistory (sometimes written as two words) was developed by Amos Funkstein and his student David Biale, who had conflicting ideas about its meaning and resonance. According to Funkstein, a counterhistory is a certain kind of truthless quasi-historical text which "consists of the systematic exploitation of the adversary's most trusted sources against their grain.... [Its] aim is the distortion of the adversary's self-image, of his identity, through the deconstruction of his memory" (69). Funkstein writes in response to Hayden White's *Metahistory* and its concept of emplotment, using counterhistory (which changes the emplotment of historical events to alter their meaning in adversarial and polemic ways) as an example of the limits of White's historical relativism. Although Funkstein admits the possibility of ethically productive counterhistory, such as the work of Karl Marx, he focuses primarily on anti-Semitic counterhistories. As such he labels the entire category "more often than not an inauthentic narrative and a

pernicious action, destructive and self-destructive" (69). However, Biale challenges that application, suggesting that counter-history "finds the truth in a subterranean tradition that must be brought to light.... Counter-history is a type of revisionist historiography, but where the revisionist proposes new theories or finds new facts, the counter-historian trans-values old ones" (131). Therefore, whereas Funkstein sees counterhistory as destructive slander, Biale attempts to make the term ethically neutral. The practice among some historians and non-academic sources of using "counter-history" to describe hypothetical counter-factual histories (as in John Heilemann's "What if 9/11 Never Happened?: A Counter-History") also confuses the matter.

But it was Biale's sense of the term that crossed over from metahistory into literary criticism and became increasingly common near the end of the 1990s as a way of describing texts which recast historical events or periods from the perspective of subaltern groups. In this context the counterhistory not only reveals collective tragedies and structures of oppression that may previously have been ignored but also brings to light forgotten achievements and cultural strengths. Edna Aizenberg, for instance, designates Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Miguel Asturias's *Men of Maize* as counterhistories for their deconstruction of the heroic mythologies of colonial powers and their recognition of vital and complex precolonial societies. Jennifer Borda calls the documentary *With Babies and Banners* a counterhistory for revealing not only the role of women in the 1936 United Auto Workers strike but also the frustration those women felt when the

strike ended and they were forced to return to the domestic sphere. Jae Roe calls Maxine Hong-Kingston's *China Men* a counterhistory not only for revealing the discrimination suffered by Chinese immigrants in the early Twentieth Century but also for reclaiming the slur "Chinaman" as part of a proud heritage.

In calling my chosen texts counterhistories, then, I draw on many of Funkstein's ideas about how counterhistory functions, but share Biale's openness regarding its ethical implications, and incorporate the subaltern focus of the more recent critics. As indirectly true histories, all three novels aim to expose what might be termed, to borrow Biale's phrase, the subterranean traditions of Juárez. These traditions are both destructive, involving the unacknowledged patterns of abuse and corruption which kill women and provide impunity for their murderers, and constructive, involving sources of strength and resistance drawn from within subaltern groups. They are subterranean because they involve the most powerless elements of society and because they are ignored both by the corrupt discourse of the Mexican government and by the widespread ignorance and apathy of the American public. It is through the particular qualities of the novel form that these traditions are brought to light, an aspect which argues for the novel's continuing relevance in a contemporary artistic climate where borders are falling around access to an unprecedentedly broad range of media. The novelist Richard Powers offers a quote that sums up the metanovelistic perspective of this thesis:

> Our need for fiction also betrays a desire for kinds of knowing that nonfiction can't easily reach.... Fiction can focalize and situate

> worldviews, pitching different perspectives and agendas against each other, linking beliefs to their believers, reflecting facts through their interpreters and interpreters through their facts. Fiction is a spreading, polysemous relational network that captures the way we and our worlds create each other.... Only a novelist can put all these actors and dozens more into the shared story they all tell.

In a situation like Juárez, where the oppressed groups have struggled to find voices with which to define their own identities and where the oppressing groups have an interest in either exercising tight control over discourse or silencing it entirely, the projective abilities of fiction become particularly useful. *If I Die in Juárez* documents the life of the urban underclass, using a range of viewpoints to dramatize the poverty and abuse which culminate in femicide. Yet it also takes the perspectives of abusers and exploiters, showing the ways in which traumatic cultural and economic shifts spark conflict with older ways of thinking and being. By giving voice to a range of perspectives and agendas, it reveals the traumatic effects of the clash between machismo and modernity while paying tribute to the strength drawn from traditional cultures. *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* chooses a protagonist who approaches the murders both as an insider, since she has ties to the community of the border and shares an ethnic identity with the victims, and as an outsider, since she has moved away from the border and learns about the crimes long after they have begun. Thus the reader is able to follow her

process of discovery, approaching the crimes through the perspective granted by her identity and personal history. The organizing consciousness of Gaspar de Alba's fictional narrator allows her to implicate the United States in the femicides, revealing to an American audience the ways in which the actions of their government agencies and economic entities have created conditions which promote the femicides.

2666 is the largest and most complex of the three novels, sprawling over almost three times as many pages as the other two and assuming an exponentially greater number of perspectives across a broad span of time. While *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez* were both written by American citizens and published in English with the aim of educating the American public about conditions in Juárez, *2666* was written in Spanish and not published in translation until five years after its original release. While the other two novels focus primarily on the femicides, *2666* incorporates them into a larger narrative about the nature and history of evil. By juxtaposing a painstaking examination of conditions in Juárez with scenes from the Holocaust and the purges in Soviet Russia, Bolaño illuminates underlying patterns that unite Juárez with other historical atrocities, forming a subterranean history of evil.

The multi-faceted perspectives and conjectural license employed by all three texts answer the potential concern that a novelistic account of the femicides might displace first-person testimonies, a question that writing about other traumatic history has often faced. For instance Robert Eaglestone has argued that

when documenting the Holocaust it is "testimony accounts, rather than fiction, that would be 'crucible of memory,' and that Holocaust fiction [is], in a sense, secondary" (131). Certainly first-person testimony provides a repository for a type of history and memory that the novel cannot create. This concern has a unique poignancy in the culture of Latin America where, as Melissa Wright asserts, the term *testimonio* is of unique importance, a term "developed as a human rights instrument during Latin America's dirty wars of the Twentieth Century" (229). In Wright's definition the power of a *testimonio* comes from the fact that it "has not been sanctioned by the state; hence, the testifier is not providing testimony in a state-sponsored court of law but in the realm of public opinion" (229). *Testimonio* has also been vital in the context of the femicides, thanks to the phenomenon Wright terms "mother-activism." Wright argues that, while Mexican culture tends to look disapprovingly upon women's engagement with social discourse (calling someone a "public woman," for instance, is equivalent to calling her a prostitute), the mothers of the deceased have had a unique impact because they have been able to "couch radical demands within the conservative demeanor of women defined as mothers" (217), an ability relying on the assumption that their role in the public sphere represents a distortion of the natural order, and their goal is to restore justice so that they may resume domesticity.

But as Wright also points out, mother-activism and *testimonio* had a broad impact upon cultural perception and state action regarding the femicides because of the behind-the-scenes labor of traditional activists, the vocal feminists

condemned by the same patriarchal discourse which mother-activism worked within. While the *testimonios* of the mothers were vital, they were a portion of a larger network of intellectual analysis. Likewise, all three of the novels being discussed in the present work draw upon information and imagery taken from *testimonios*, not only those of the mothers but of other observers such as police and forensic investigators. But through the range of perspectives and projections offered by the novel, they extend that information and imagery into new realms of meaning and more complex argumentation. In their analysis of artistic representations of Juárez, Volk and Schlotterbeck assert that "it is precisely because the state has failed so abjectly in stopping these murders that 'fictional' narratives have become both the site where victims are mourned and the means by which justice can be restored" (122). There are many ways in which the victims have been mourned, and it may be too ambitious to imagine that fictional representations can restore justice. However, what fiction can do is construct an understanding of underlying meanings for a difficult and unresolved historical moment.

Chapter 1

Authenticity and the Negative Sublime *If I Die in Juárez*

In writing *If I Die in Juárez*, Stella Pope Duarte set out to document for American readers not only the specific phenomenon of the femicides but also the lives led by the women who were its victims. Her goal was to "tell the story of the young women in Juárez, in an intimate and passionate manner that offers readers the opportunity to 'walk in their shoes,' and experience the streets of Juárez" ("Research"). To that end, as Duarte points out in "Research," the novel follows the lives of three Mexican women who each represent some key aspect of the shared experience of the city's working poor: Evita, who lives in the red light district, Petra, who migrates from the south to do *maquiladora* work, and Mayela, a Tarahumara native. In an interview with Veronica Martinez, Duarte pointed out that "the women brutalized in Ciudad Juárez are from the poor working class and have no voice, except that which we give to them." By writing a novel she sought to communicate to American readers the difficulties experienced by a group that would otherwise be silent.

As an artistic strategy this involved both significant courage and significant danger. The voicelessness of the women of Juárez may have made it necessary for her to speak on their behalf, but it also rendered them incapable of arguing with or contradicting her words. In recognition of the weight of that

responsibility, Duarte put three years of research into the novel, visiting Juárez and speaking with the women whose lives she sought to document. The investigation involved, as Duarte points out in a page on her official site,

> visiting actual sites in the city where women's bodies were uncovered, walking the streets of the red-light districts of the city, touring 'las colonias' where the poor reside, interviewing mothers whose daughters have been murdered, and meeting with activists, investigators, and those who work with women's organizations in Juárez and El Paso. ("Research")

That effort is evident in the novel, which is loaded with a rich stream of unsettling detail establishing the ways in which patriarchy, economic destruction, and environmental pollution combine to make life miserable for poor women in Juárez. The depth of research pays off particularly well, for instance, in the scenes which take place in the *colonias*, where the working poor live "in tents and in houses made of cardboard, old tires, and pieces of metal and rusty pipes" (109), next to a "huge dump, with its smell of human waste, decayed food, tires burning, [and] chemicals exploding" (111), and where water is delivered in "round plastic drums… thrown out by the American-owned copper smelter" (114) and gives children rashes. Unpleasant and authentic, such details convey the texture of life in a way nothing else can, and Duarte conveys them in a straightforward and highly visual style, avoiding complex or fragmentary sentences and mostly eschewing tricky metaphors or similes in favor of literal and image-driven

description. The events in the plot proceed chronologically, shifts in perspective are clearly noted, and the omniscient third-person narrator avoids establishing a voice or personality distinct from the thoughts of the characters. On the rare occasions when figurative language is employed, it tends toward unambiguous metaphors and strong emotion: After moving from the country Evita feels that Juárez is "a chain around her throat, tightening" (106); the toxic smoke from an American factory covers Mayela's colonia "like a black mesh entrapping the land, the primitive dwellings, and the people" (110); on her first night as a prostitute Evita observes that her partner's "face was a mask of colors blended on her skin.... Evita thought perhaps it was Cristal's way of hiding from what she had to do" (186). In each case the figurative language provides simple and compelling images, tracking closely with the thoughts or feelings of the characters and requiring little effort to unpack.

Duarte's transparent language seems appropriate relative to her goal of speaking for the women of Juárez. Textual strategies which called attention to themselves would distract from the purity with which those voices are communicated; by avoiding flashy or experimental writing she emphasizes that her goal is to channel their voices rather than creating her own. Of course the effect of transparency is an illusory one, as the characters and their words and experiences are still Duarte's creation. But her insistence that showy writing be sidelined to create the space needed to convey hard facts about life on the streets of Juárez conveys deep respect for her subject and a willingness to construct an

authentic representation.

In addition to conveying the experience of life in Juárez, Duarte also lends voice to the community's observations about the political and economic roots of its state. While its political agenda is neither as overt nor as provocative as *Desert Blood*, Duarte isn't afraid to critique the ways in which governmental and corporate forces are responsible for the suffering of the citizens of Juárez. When Petra's family is unable to make a living off its farm, the narrator points out that her father "blamed the American government for supporting NAFTA in 1992, which caused thousands of villagers to lose their farmlands and granted big corporations the right to establish themselves in foreign countries, making huge profits on the sweat of the poor" (39). It's this poverty, along with an illness that Estevan blames on a lifetime spent mining silver, which drives the family north and puts Petra in danger. Duarte also implicates the Mexican government in the origins of the *colonias*, since "long ago the government of Mexico had promised the poor that they would give them land if they voted for its political cause, but the leaders never bothered to tell them that the land they would possess would be worthless" (109). Thus the novel illuminates the perspectives of Mexican citizens on the ways their own situation stems from leadership on both sides of the border.

Duarte also documents the ways in which cultural patterns clash with industrialization, resulting in jarring and violent consequences. In this regard she exemplifies Powers' strategy of "pitching different perspectives and agendas against each other, linking beliefs to their believers," since the novel assumes the

perspectives not only of its female protagonists but also of the men they struggle against. It explores Petra's excitement at rising within the factory's ranks, for instance, but also Antonio's worry that he "wasn't good enough for her now that she was a professional businesswoman" (205). Antonio's hostility and possessiveness become more understandable when placed against the fact that he feels "unsure how to deal with Petra as a woman who was now working and making a life in Juárez for herself apart from him, a woman feeling for the first time her own independence" (205). As Petra's uncle Prospero observes later, some Mexican men "feel worthless because their wives support their family, and so they take it out on them, beating them up and making their lives miserable" (143). The later implication that Prospero beats his wife Ofelia is ironic in that light, and reinforces the depth of Duarte's critique.

Similarly, when the janitor Narciso Odin rescues Mayela from the bullying of the other children at the Institute he becomes a sympathetic figure; she comes to "depend on Narciso's protection and see him as the father she had never known" (172). When Mayela spends Christmas at his home in the *colonias*, she is horrified by his attempts to make her his wife and narrowly escapes being raped. But while the narration does full justice to Mayela's horror and betrayal, it also provides a surprisingly sympathetic portrayal of Narciso's motivations, showing how polygamy and a youthful entrance into sexuality are normal within his society, and how even after she rejects him he continues to leave her presents and defend her from the other children (218-9). Conflict in both instances stems from

a clash of roles; Narciso must negotiate between his position as a traditional patriarch and his place within the Industralized world of the Institute, while Antonio must find a way to achieve self-esteem in a society that no longer values what he has to offer.

Duarte's commitment to exploring multiple perspectives also helps illuminate the ways in which large-scale social dysfunction results in smaller-scale patterns of exploitation. Evita's brother Reynaldo initially seems hypocritical for fearing that she might end up working in the red light district, given his own frequent visits there. But the text reveals that his need for prostitutes stems from his disgust at his own body, since his chest and arms are scarred from "playing with firecrackers that had exploded in a dump site filled with chemical wastes from an American factory" (3), and "the women he picked up in La Zona del Canal didn't care what kind of scars he had" (18). Thus the indifference of corporations and governments to environmental safety is incriminated in the sexual and economic exploitation of the women of Juárez. Duarte's chains of cause and effect span from the broadest government policies to the most personal consequences, illuminating the international repercussions connecting the political to the personal.

The fact that Duarte speaks for such a broad range of voices and perspectives softens one potential objection, the presumptiveness implied in her stated goal of speaking for the voiceless. The sheer range of perspectives she addresses and her willingess to give fair treatment to those which are unappealing

highlight the extent of her research. They also point to the presence of a fictionalizing consciousness, counteracting somewhat the sense of transparent documentation created by Duarte's sentence-level style. And it is her commitment to lending a voice to such a broad range of characters which places her work in the same tradition of counterhistory as Achebe, Asturias, and Hong-Kingston. Like those works, it takes on two hegemonic narratives, the American government's narrative of the benefits of free trade and the Mexican government's narrative of a just society. On NAFTA's signing two years before the events of *If I Die in Juárez*, President Bill Clinton promised that the agreement – along with the broader trend of opening economic channels between the US and Mexico – would bring "an even more rapid closing of the gap between our two wage rates. And as the benefits of economic growth are spread to Mexico to working people, what will happen? They'll have more disposable income… and there will be less illegal immigration." At the same ceremony former President Gerald Ford said economic liberalization would stimulate "growth, prosperity, and jobs from the Arctic to the Antarctic" ("President Clinton Signing NAFTA"). In arguing with the assertions of Clinton and Ford, Duarte bypasses statistical and economic analyses regarding the success of free trade. Instead, her response draws from the experiences of those most traumatically affected to create a counter-narrative in which the economic liberalization, urbanization, and industrial expansion of the late twentieth century coincide with the disintegration of traditional lifestyles and the degradation of the physical and spiritual

environment, with the ultimate result being a rise in violence and exploitation among the working poor.

Parallel with its economic argument, the novel also advances a counterhistory which opposes the tendency many critics have documented for the government to blame the victims:

> Portraying the victims as women who deceived their families by becoming prostitutes, Mexican authorities have both dismissed their deaths and made them responsible for their own murders. In 1999, the Chihuahuan state attorney general darkly implied that "it is impossible not to get wet when you go outside in the rain; it is also impossible for a woman not to get killed when she goes out alone at night." (Volk and Schlotterbeck 131)

As cited in the introduction to this thesis, Tabuenca Cordóba and Rodrigo, Montané and Pulitzer have also written about the ways in which the government's discourse demeaned the victims of the femicides, and Amnesty International has documented the government's refusal to see the killings as reflective of broad systemic or social issues. Duarte's political and economic critique makes it clear what a self-serving response this was, since most of the conditions allowing women to be killed with impunity – especially a corrupt incompetent police force and a nonexistent public infrastructure – were their direct responsibility. By sympathetically examining the lives of the kinds of women who become victims, Duarte argues with the government's assertion that they somehow deserved their

murders. Evita comes close to dying on two occasions, once when she is drugged at a party and once because of Ricardo's jealousy, so the novel does not contradict the assertion that the victims may have exposed themselves to trouble by going to clubs and parties or working in the red light districts. Instead its intimate examination of Evita's psychology and personal history makes it clear that she had no choice except to put herself in those situations. Thus Duarte uses her adversary's "most trusted sources against their grain" (Funkstein 69) – replicating the government's images of the victims, yet placing them in a light sympathetic to the victim and hostile to the authorities.

For its first three quarters, then, the novel deconstructs the aura of mystery built around the femicides. Evita nearly dies from an overdose, then narrowly avoids Ricardo's plan to have her mutilated and killed by El Cucuy. Mayela is threatened with rape and death by Sebastian, and her sister Cina flees a husband who has tried three times to kill her. All of these instances back up Charles Bowden's assertion that victims knew their killers personally and the killers' impunity was a symptom of corruption and poverty, since "murders in Juárez are hardly ever investigated, and so in death, women finally receive the same treatment as dead men" (14). Through her focus on the ways the violence is rooted in machismo and sexual exploitation, Duarte also creates a context which backs up Alicia Gaspar de Alba's argument against restricting the scope of the term femicide:

> To argue that "only" ninety of the over five hundred murdered

> women in Juárez are victims of sexual violence, and that the majority of these deaths are the result of domestic violence or social violence is to deny that all of these crimes are, as Caputi and Russell say, forms of sexual terrorism against women which resulted in their deaths. Hence, they are all femicides. ("Poor Brown Woman" 83)

Yet Bowden and Gaspar de Alba would likely see each other as occupying somewhat opposing positions, since Gaspar de Alba has worked to expose the femicides to an American audience, while Bowden argues that "focusing on the dead women enables Americans to ignore the dead men, and ignoring the dead men enables the United States to ignore the failure of its free-trade schemes" (14). So it's a testament to the ideological even-handedness of Duarte's text and the fidelity of her reporting that she creates a world which convincingly incorporates both interpretations.

But the final quarter of the novel takes a different tack and reveals a specific agency behind the femicides when Petra secures a job at a *maquiladora* assembling components for Western Electronics. She attracts the attention of and becomes fixated by Agustìn Miramontes Guzman, the *maquiladora*'s new owner, who kidnaps her, rapes her, and makes videos of her torture and mutilation. After Petra's disappearance, her family convinces Evita's GI boyfriend Harry Hughes to put pressure on Agustìn, whose family is afraid of an international incident and forces him to leave for Paris. His departure is the only thing that keeps Petra alive;

her neighbor Luis Ledezma finds her in Las Lomas de Poleo, the vacant desert area where many of the other dead women were discovered.

Petra's kidnapping provides the novel's climactic point. After her rescue and a short scene in the hospital, the narrative cuts to an epilogue ten years later when Petra and Evita have formed an activist group to combat the femicides, and are about to testify in front of an international commission. The discovery that the scion of a rich family of *narcotraficantes* and industrialists is behind (at least some of) the killings, with the goal of enacting a violent ceremony of ritual purification, provides an answer to the quasi-mystery plot, and closure to the main reading imperative. The final revelation is also emphasized by foreshadowing in other scenes: Shortly before her overdose Evita sees an unnamed man who later turns out to be Agustìn with a woman in a white dress and later she sees the same woman's picture next to an article about a woman found mutilated in the desert.

Yet the sequence with Agustìn is a problematic, partly because his portrayal as a character is less convincing than many of the novel's other malignant male agencies. While the other female characters have understandable and often ambivalent reactions to men, even the ones they're attracted to, Petra's feelings about Agustìn are described in a cartoonishly hyperbolic way that lacks any sense of depth or proportion: After one short meeting at a party and a phone conversation, he "made everything else in Petra's life appear meaningless" (254), and when Petra gives him a shoulder massage in a restaurant, "she sensed Agustìn's power as she touched him, and her hands got hot. She was afraid she

was rubbing too hard, as the friction her hands produced was like fire between them" (272). This inflated quasi-romance novel language smacks of the failure of the objective correlative: In her presence, he goes beyond merely being wealthy and powerful, producing a sort of animal magnetism inexplicable to the reader. This isn't helped much by his behavior; prior to kidnapping Petra, he acts mainly in bursts of shallow self-indulgence, feeling pleased with himself for cutting off other drivers on the freeway or being pointlessly rude to waiters. His behavior stands in odd contrast to Petra's rapt adoration, especially given that until meeting him she's one of the most sensible and level-headed characters in the novel. His persona doesn't improve much after the kidnapping when he forces her to put on his grandmother's wedding gown before lapsing into a sort of Dennis Hopper/*Blue Velvet*-like mania that, while certainly horrifying, also verges on camp, ranting in a way freighted with improbably overt socioeconomic and ethnic critiques: He points to his family's coat of arms ("Cortes Miramontes Guzman") and proclaims himself "a conqueror – there's nothing you can do but submit, and submit again!" (295). Later, he justifies his decision to kill her by asking, rhetorically, "Why should someone who knows nothing about elegance be allowed to live? Why?" (297).

So if Ricardo or Sebastian are horrifying, it's because their casual sociopathy seems like a logical and even familiar extension of their machismo, something rooted in human emotion, and a wickedly rational means of exercising a form of social control over women that may sometimes find its endpoint in

murder. Duarte has said she has "been victimized by [machismo], and [has] seen its destruction in family members and in others I have known" (Interview with Veronica Martinez), and the humanity of male antagonists like Ricardo and Sebastian seems rooted in the same kind of well-researched authenticity which underpins the novel's descriptive prowess. But Agustìn seems less human and more an abstract personification of urges and philosophies that other characters show in more textured ways. The result – for better or worse – is to highlight his fictionality, spotlighting the ways in which the text projects instead of the ways in which it documents, and reminding the reader that Duarte doesn't *know* who killed the real women whose memorial crosses feature on the book's cover. While the non-fictional Juárez certainly contains violent drug lords, some of whom may have killed the women being found in vacant lots, it's more likely to contain men like Ricardo and Sebastian than men like Agustìn.

It's also troubling that Agustìn feels like more of an invention than the other characters because Petra's abduction and near-murder plays into the stereotype that the majority of those murdered were factory workers. For better or worse, the factory-worker image has become a key aspect of the cultural shorthand around the femicides. For instance, in the introduction to an interview with a journalist who blogs about drug wars, journalist Miranda Simon refers to "a decade [in which] 400 factory girls were killed mysteriously," an identification that is simply untrue – as Volk and Schlotterbeck point out, only about twenty percent of the dead were *maquiladora* workers. Similarly, the song "Las Mujeres

de Juárez," by the influential *conjunto* band Los Tigres del Norte, refers to the murdered women as "Homespun women maquila workers/Reliable and efficient, hired hands without equal" (qtd. in Volk and Schlotterbeck 142).

The habit of broadly labeling the murdered women as factory workers, despite evidence to the contrary, stems from activism emphasizing the family-oriented virtuousness of the disappeared as a way of counteracting government rhetoric blaming them for their own deaths. Volk and Schlotterbeck criticize nonfiction authors such as Bowden and Debbie Nathan for coming "unwittingly close to reproducing the logic of Mexican officials" by sexualizing their descriptions of *maquiladora* workers (131), but the drive to *de*-sexualize the victims also plays into a binary constructed by the government in which only virtuous women are worthy of protection. Such a response ignores the fact that the accusation of prostitution shouldn't be a valid defense even if it were factually true. In a just society, the lives of prostitutes should be protected and honored as much as the lives of factory workers, leaving aside the question of whether or not a just society would contain prostitution. And even if the missing women had engaged in the sex trade as a way of supplementing the miserable wages paid by the factories, their deaths would be equally tragic and worth the full attention of authorities. I've mentioned previously that Evita's character does an excellent job of counteracting the government's logic in this regard, but the sequence with Petra bears out a troubling stereotype, one which becomes more troubling precisely because it appears next to other material that is alien to the novel's

general sense of authenticity.

The novel's authenticity also comes into question through its ending, which shows the tendency noted by Dominick LaCapra for accounts of trauma – particularly fictional representations – "to convert trauma into the occasion for sublimity, to transvalue it into a test of the self or the group and an entry into the extraordinary" (23). This first occurs in the climactic moments of *If I Die in Juárez*, when Petra turns her abduction and torture into an opportunity to reconnect with her spiritual and geographic roots, achieving a type of personal transcendence that symbolically recapitulates the struggles of her heritage:

> When Petra felt Agustin's body over hers, inflicting new pain… she became like one of the crouched figures on the mountains of Montenegro and danced silent and exuberant within herself.… And when he told her she would submit, and submit and submit, Petra resisted and became el Río Gris, fighting the pride and arrogance of the ancient conquistador. She became, once more, el mestizo rising, and she lived for another day. (308)

The epilogue then notes that Petra has formed the activist group *Mujeras Unidas de Juárez*, which is "honoring their foundress… with festivities, dignitaries, celebrities and world news coverage" (325). Petra's new status presumably represents a third way between the rural traditionalism of Montenegro and the corruption of Juárez, a new identity forged in the fires of her ordeal, although there is an absence of detail about their current lifestyle – the only meaningful

thing we know about the characters is whom they married. It's sadly ironic that Duarte portrays the murders as being the initiative for the formation of a new cross-border activist identity, since, as Melissa Wright has documented, many of the coalitions that had been formed around anti-femicide activism were disintegrating in 2008, when the *If I Die in Juárez* was published.

The act of converting the traumatic into an occasion for sublimity and the formation of group identity may be problematic since, as LaCapra points out, it results in "an unwarranted sense of spiritual uplift" that makes an incongruous match when placed against events whose real consequences were unambiguously shattering and terrible – the classic contemporary example being *Schindler's List* (14). LaCapra also raises Hayden White's concept of emplotment, relative to historical events, and approaches the question of whether certain plot structures might be inappropriate for certain events. A reader "might justifiably criticize a work of art on historical as well as aesthetic and normative grounds" if it chose a plot structure unsuitable for the material. In the case of *If I Die in Juárez*, the final emplotment of uplift and unification seems inappropriate relative to a story whose real-world component is entirely tragic. Indeed, one of the risks Funkstein warned against in his more negative conception of counterhistory was the ways in which inappropriate emplotment could wring new meanings out of an adversary's history.

And yet there's an admirable subversiveness to the insistence that the history of the murders be understood as a narrative of discovery and unification, a

subversiveness that seems like a microcosm of the novel's larger achievement. Returning to Biale's definition of counterhistory, *If I Die in Juárez* illuminates the subterranean traditions of artistic and cultural strength that help the three protagonists survive their various ordeals. Each of the three protagonists has some sort of artistic talent which aids in her salvation from violence and moves her toward redemption: Mayela rescues herself from poverty and degradation through painting, Petra lifts herself above Agustìn with her grandmother's song, and Evita wins honest work at the flower shop through her talent for patterns and arrangements. It is only through hardship that each woman discovers the strength of her gifts, and if Duarte's research made her aware of the ways in which the real-life women of Juárez have found strength in the tragedy, surely this is the most subterranean tradition of all.

In its attempt to capture life during the year the femicides came to attention, *If I Die in Juárez* engages in several types of counterhistorical polemic. Using the experiences of women on the streets, it rewrites the narrative of a period that was supposed to mark an increase in growth and prosperity, using a range of conflicting perspectives to convincingly link "free trade" and industrialization to social breakdown. It reimagines the lives of women in the red light district, challenging the government's assertions that they had put themselves in danger and were undeserving of protection. And while it may sometimes fail to fully challenge the troubling ideological underpinnings of the myths it confronts, its insistence on rewriting a tragic history with a narrative of

uplift may be its most courageous and provocative element.

Chapter 2

Direct and Indirect Truth in *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*

Alicia Gaspar de Alba published *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* in 2005, seven years after the events it portrays. Five years later she coedited the nonfiction anthology *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera* (to which she also contributed an introduction and an essay), a book which advances many of the same ideas as *Desert Blood* in a way that readers may find more credible. Meanwhile, a short sample chapter from a *Desert Blood* sequel has been circulating on the web since 2008 with no announcement of forward progress or a publication date. Her strategic shift toward essays and away from fiction begs the question of why Gaspar de Alba's first book about the femicides was a novel when her agenda seems more political than aesthetic.

This question can be partially answered by reading *Making a Killing*, which in many places highlights the uncertainty and obscurity surrounding the events in Juárez, a state of affairs that, as mentioned previously, has become worse now that violence has engulfed the city. The confusion points to Dominick LaCapra's observations about the advantages of a novel, in terms of truth claims. As mentioned in the introduction, LaCapra pointed out that fiction, while not claiming to record a directly true record of events, can be said to indirectly capture truths about the experience of living in a given time and place which still

fall under the umbrella of history. For a reader who has not closely followed recent scholarship around the murders, the anthology emphasizes how many small but significant details have been appropriated from real life; it even serves as a sort of visual companion, containing photographs of many of the same sites and landmarks featured in the novel. But what the novel can do that the essay cannot is form a rhetorically convincing framework around which to arrange the real-life details, thereby making an argument about the society from which they are drawn. I term *Desert Blood* a fictional counterhistory for the ways in which it sketches a portrait of events which occurred in the first several years of the femicides, ending in the novel's present moment of 1998, while changing the emplotment of those events to challenge American audiences to question the responsibilities of their own society.

The protagonist of *Desert Blood*, Ivon Villa is an academic several weeks shy of finishing her dissertation who has returned to her hometown of El Paso so that she can cross into Juárez and adopt a child from a *maquiladora* worker, whom she and her partner Brigit will then raise together. However, when the expectant mother turns up dead and Ivon stays to find another child to adopt, her sister Irene disappears, drawing Ivon into an investigation of the murders, as well as the socioeconomic conditions framing them. The narrative ends with Irene's rescue from a ring of extreme pornographers who plan to broadcast her rape and dismemberment on the Internet.

Pondering the situation afterward, in the shadow of a plant owned by the

notoriously polluting American corporation ASARCO and its "twin phalluses of… smokestacks rising into the azure desert sky" (330), Ivon theorizes what she feels is the most important question: "What did it matter who killed them? This wasn't a case of whodunit, but rather of who was allowing these crimes to happen?" (333). She concludes that the murders represent a deliberate collusion between multiple levels of authority on both sides of the border to assemble an array of destructive forces – "pornographers, gang members, serial killers, corrupt policeman, foreign nationals with a taste for hurting women, immigration officers protecting the homeland" (333) – as a means of keeping the female workers in check, so their fertility will neither slow the profit of the *maquiladoras* nor pollute the north side of the border with brown babies possessing the right to citizenship. She believes that "this thing implicated everyone. No wonder the crimes had not been solved, nor would they ever be solved until someone with much more power than she… brought this conspiracy into the open" (335).

From a purely logical standpoint, the argument is flawed. First, the idea that the murders are designed to control fertility makes little sense, given that the majority of the women being murdered were not pregnant, the murdered factory workers' fertility was subject to the draconian restrictions imposed by management, and if they had jobs they likely had no plans to cross the border. Second, a killing spree seems like a terrible way to manage surplus labor if the goal is to keep the factories full of exploited workers; one assumes the perception of Juárez as dangerous would encourage *maquiladora* employees to either quit

their jobs and return to southern Mexico or try to enter the United States, neither, according to Ivon's theory, desirable results. Third, as horrifying as the statistics are, the number of women killed is tiny compared to the overall population of Juárez and the number of illegal border crossings. In the introduction to *Making a Killing*, Gaspar de Alba and her coeditor Georgina Guzmán take a cue from Eve Ensler by asking rhetorically, "Is the poor brown female really an endangered species on the U.S.-Mexico border?" (10). But the metaphor of an endangered species seems hyperbolic, given that the goal of sexual terrorism is suppression, not eradication, and much of the conspirators' fear (as imagined by Gaspar de Alba) relates to the vast numbers and prolific fertility of brown women.

But the value of asserting a conspiracy is less as literal truth than as an organizing metaphor to help conceptualize the bigotry and exploitation that mark – even at a subconscious level – the actions of forces such as the border patrol, *maquiladora* owners, and American police officers. In this regard *Desert Blood* uses the liberties afforded by fiction to re-emplot a series of broadly-acknowledged facts (the unsolved murders of women, the rise of the border economy, the controversy over immigration), weaving them together into a story of large-scale ethnic cleansing. This narrative runs counter to the ways in which other sources have emplotted the same facts; the Mexican government, for instance, emplotted the murders using the narrative of a serial killer, declaring them an isolated event and selecting a series of scapegoats whose capture and public shaming tried to provide the illusion of resolution.

By revising or reenvisioning the ways in which meaning is constructed from a given set of events, the counterhistorian may engage in the "distortion of the adversary's self-image, of his identity, through the deconstruction of his memory" (Funkstein 69). In re-emplotting the first four years of the Juárez murders, Gaspar de Alba challenges the narratives put forward by the Mexican government, and the novel's translation and publication in Spanish serves to further that agenda. But the fact that the novel was initially written for an English-speaking audience suggests that its adversary is also the United States, with its reflexive disdain for its southern neighbor and the grim *schadenfruede* with which it views the murders. Early on, Ivon expresses surprise at not having heard about the murders before, since "people love the morbid stuff. Especially when it makes Mexico look bad" (40). *Desert Blood* works to shake up the attitudes of U.S. readers by using the metaphor of a conspiracy to incriminate them in the women's deaths. So the focus on the American side of the femicides, whether conspiracy or otherwise, isn't a denial of the existence of Mexican sexism – after all, the novel opens with an epigraph from Gloria Anzaldua, one of the best-known chroniclers of Mexican patriarchy. Rather it shows an awareness of the larger context in which that particular brand of misogyny, and its relationship to the femicides, has already been exhaustively documented, making the need to focus on other causes more pressing.

Fiction is interpretively convenient in this context since it sidesteps many of the debates about truthfulness which have dogged the metahistorical

conversation regarding emplotment and counterhistory. By writing a novel Gaspar de Alba can write a history of the murders which lays out their ethical and political significance and hypothesizes about their causes, without the expectation of an adherence to literal fact, and without the constraints of the absence of researchable and verifiable detail imposed by shabby investigation and a drought of communication. At the same time, the inclusion of literally true detail highlights the urgency of the situation, reminding readers that the subject being treated still requires meaningful real-world action. The ending thesis, of a large-scale international conspiracy to restrain the poor brown women of Juárez, may be empirically arguable. But because of its interpolation via a fictional character and its partial foundation on fictional events it may still be used to generate an indirectly true history of the emergence of the femicides, one which convincingly points to the social and political factors which made them possible.

The fictional character through whom the novel is mediated, Ivon Villa, represents the novel's foundational blurring between types of truth. Like the author, Ivon is a lesbian academic from a Mexican-American family who grew up on the El Paso border before moving to California. Ivon married at a Unitarian church in Iowa, and Gaspar de Alba has one of the 18,000 legal same-sex marriages in California. By connecting herself to her protagonist, Gaspar de Alba highlights the ways in which her own views and ideas shape the conclusions Ivon reaches. The effect of this blurring is paradoxical. On the one hand it reinforces those conclusions, since the narrowed gap between author and protagonist

discourages the reader from viewing Ivon's thoughts as ironic or unreliable. And yet tying Ivon's view on the situation to Gaspar de Alba's reminds the reader that the conclusions revealed at the end of the novel are shaped by a very particular set of values and interests.

As Steven S. Volk and Marian E. Schlotterbeck have noted, Ivon "adumbrates Anzaldua's mestiza consciousness; she is a citizen of a borderlands nation" (145). But they acknowledge only one of several aspects of her border identity, since the uncertain boundary between author and protagonist allows form to recapitulate content by placing her – and the entire novel – in a borderland between fiction and reality, mirroring her ethnic identity and also the border nature of her sexual identity. Ivon's self-identification as "butch" – with her short hair and masculine dress, she is often mistakenly addressed as "sir" – allows *Desert Blood* to explore a running subtheme of the tendency for men, within both Mexican and American culture, to feel attraction toward masculine women. A man who later turns out to be involved in the Internet porn ring hits on Ivon persistently during a flight; her family tells anecdotes about her father's affair with a female truck driver; an El Paso detective named Pete McCuts, the son of a female mechanic, struggles to avoid being turned on when Ivon corrects his terminology. Ivon glosses the situation by observing that "lesbians [are] every macho's wet dream – to voyeurize or to conquer" (134), suggesting that the sexual appeal of lesbians resides in the challenge of subsuming them into a heterosexual order. The conspiracy Ivon describes aims not only to seal the

national border by reducing or eliminating immigration but also to purify or homogenize the north side of the border by cutting down on the migration of fertile Hispanic women, reducing the troubling mixes of identity inherent in the border consciousness. Ivon's analysis thus suggests that men's attraction to lesbians comes from a parallel urge, the desire to close the sexual border by reinforcing a heteronormative order in which gender roles are clear and women's sexuality serves that of men. It's appropriate, then, that *Desert Blood* makes its stand for both types of mixture through flirtation with the ontological border between fiction and reality.

Ivon's assumption of the subject position of author also highlights the fictionality of the work on the occasions when it moves out of her point of view, abbreviated hereafter as POV. While the majority of *Desert Blood* is limited to Ivon's perceptions, several chapters are devoted to the perceptions of the victims while being either kidnapped or tortured. Through its ability to project into the experiences of others, incorporating multiple narrative POVs, the novelistic form allows a sort of quasi-testimony for those who are prevented from describing their own experiences, providing a visceral shock that a nonfiction portrait could not achieve. The novel opens from the POV of a woman being dragged by the neck through the Sonoran desert, feeling "her belly drag over sand and rocks, the wound on her breast pricked by sagebrush" (1). The narrator notes that the kidnappers have "stuffed her bra in her mouth, and the hooks hurt her tongue" (1), taking a detail from real life (the fact that at least one victim was found with her

undergarments in her mouth) and forcing the reader to experience it vicariously as the sensations of a living person, highlighting its discomfort and indignity. The woman is drugged and "[can]not feel the blades slicing into her belly" (1), but when they begin ripping out her organs she hears "the tearing sound, like the time she'd had a tooth pulled at the dentist's office, something torn out by the roots, deeper than the drug" (2). The fact that the drugs block her full experience of pain, and she describes the feeling of mutilation to herself (and therefore the reader) through comparison with a more familiar sensation, is an admission by the text that it must represent the unrepresentable. The image it chooses is equally striking in both its affective power and its indirectness.

Gaspar de Alba also dramatizes the time Ivon's sister Irene spends in captivity, using Irene's POV. Irene hears her captors conversing excitedly about what they will doing during filming, taking bets on who can ejaculate first while stimulating each other with descriptions of humiliating and mutilating her; "the uglier it gets, the more they grunt and egg each other on" (172). Incorporating their conversation allows Gaspar de Alba to give the reader a blunt reminder of the sexual pleasure the killers would have derived from their murders. Their eagerness to torture Irene resonates with the reference in the opening scene to the killers laughing, an image that returns later when Irene "hears wild demonic laughter that makes the girl do a staccato of screams" (267) as a woman is killed. And while there is, as of this writing, no evidence that the murdered women were used for snuff porn, the scene captures a sense of murder-as-communal-

celebration common to many theories about the crimes. Consider, for example, an unidentified informant who Rodriguez, Montané and Pulitzer quote as saying "Sometimes, when you cross a shipment of drugs to the United States, adrenaline is so high that you want to celebrate by killing women" (256). While a journalistic account may describe the physical grotesquerie of a mutilated body, Gaspar de Alba's fictional scenes more fully convey the psychological grotesquerie of the fact that the killings were not only a source of sexual pleasure but potentially a communal bloodsport and a form of male bonding.

By going inside the minds of the victims, Gaspar de Alba is also able to provide them history and psychological depth, allowing her to complicate and deconstruct many of the negative images popularized by culture and government. One chapter follows the POV of the character Mireya during her abduction by the snuff ring. As a worker at the Phillips plant who migrated from the southern part of the country and enjoys "discos and dancing and freedom to do what she wants without permission" (147), Mireya is representative of the stereotype of the *maqui-loca*, the Americanized factory employee corrupted by separation from domesticity. She is also abducted from a nightclub, an image used by the government to claim that many of the murdered women were courting trouble. But Mireya is portrayed as naïve and shy, a virgin who dances as a way of dealing with the stress and fatigue of her demanding job, who came to Juárez because her stepfather murdered her mother. She only trusts her kidnapper because he has been introduced by a female coworker. And while she is a virgin, a later exchange

addresses the underlying realities of the *maquiladora*-worker-as-prostitute stereotype: Ivon asks, "Do they *turn* into whores… or is that just how people perceive them for having jobs outside the home?" and Ximena responds, "Some don't have a choice, you know. They got kids to feed and they can't do that on their pitiful salaries" (211). The exchange addresses both the unfair judgments cast upon female workers and the economic realities that sometimes dictate behavior.

While the dramatized renditions of abduction and murder work from well-established facts, one of the novel's more fanciful aspects – the device of violent pornography being broadcast on the Internet – also fuses real-world and fictional detail in an attempt to reach an indirect form of truth. Early in her investigation, Ivon discovers a tourism website called *Border Lines* that attempts to market the sexuality of Juárez's women to visiting Americans: "Every week hundreds of young Mexican girls arrive in Juárez from all over Mexico.... While many will begin their careers in one of the various *maquiladora* factories in the area, often they end up in the many bars and brothels" (117). Scanning the site, Ivon finds a free-drink coupon and pictures of scantily-clad women next to the flashing words "*prostitution is legal here*" (117). The site and the quoted text are both real. In the essay "Poor Brown Woman," Gaspar de Alba recounts finding it while researching *Desert Blood*, and although the offending page was no longer available in 2010, she points out that it sought to direct the reader to "precisely the area where a number of victims had last been seen" (80). The text from *Border*

Lines reappears in the novel as the opening narration for a film titled *Doris Meets El Diablo*, pornographic snuff filmed by the same company that captures Irene. No evidence currently exists that any of the murdered women were used in commercially-distributed pornography, violent or otherwise. But the plot device allows a juxtaposition between murder and the *Border Lines* text which suggests equivalencies in kind, if not degree, thus implicating the marketing of prostitution into a continuum of sexual exploitation whose far end involves torture and murder. The critique is extended through an epigraph from Jane Caputi stating "It is in pornography that the basic meanings of sex crime are distilled – the female body fetishized, displayed, sacralized, only so that she can be hated, profaned, possessed, sacrificed" (iv), establishing a context that throws the same net over all pornography as it does the novel's hypothetical snuff porn, an assertion more daring and uncomfortable than the mere condemnation of prostitution.

The text's critique of the fusion between sexuality and commerce is further extended through the "lucky penny" device, the one aspect of the book whose fictionality Gaspar de Alba addresses directly within *Desert Blood.* The pornography ring Ivon investigates plies its trade through a website called exxxtremelylucky.com, referring to the pornographers' habit of calling the murdered women "lucky pennies" and implanting pennies in various places of the bodies before discarding them. A set of two American citizens of Hispanic descent is referred to as a "nickel;" the meaning of "dime" is unexplained but presumably refers to Caucasian women. Gaspar de Alba clarifies in a section at

the front of the book labeled "Disclaimer" that "none of the bodies of the actual victims was ever found to have had American pennies inside them" but that the pennies in the story represent the fact that "poor brown women… are, in other words, as expendable as pennies in the border economy" (v). Explaining the novel's central metaphor in the introduction is perhaps an aesthetic compromise; certainly it takes some of the thrill out of readerly discovery or interpretation. But leaving that question aside – as well as the practical viability of streaming murder on the Web, a medium which broadcasts far beyond the apathetic or corrupt police departments of Juárez and El Paso and whose sense of anonymity tends to be more illusion than fact – the penny image represents a central metaphorical locus around which the questions of sex, murder, and economics revolve, especially since the man who runs it turns out to be a Texas Ranger.

Perhaps the most intriguing mixture of real-life detail and fictionalization, however, occurs around the character of Abdel Latif Sharif Sharif, known in the Mexican media as "the Egyptian" or "the Juárez ripper," here renamed Amen Hakim Hassan, or "Dr. Amen." Elsa, the mother of the child whom Ivon adopts, has several encounters with Dr. Amen, who works as a medical officer in a *maquiladora* and inseminates her without her knowledge as a way of testing a contraceptive shot he is developing. She becomes pregnant, since the shot is ineffective, and as a side effect it gives her ovarian cancer. While the real Sharif worked for a *maquiladora*, the contraceptive subplot appears to have been an invention; Rodriguez, Montané and Pulitzer identify him as a chemist during his

life in the U.S. and an engineer at the factory in Mexico. But Dr. Amen's contraceptive experimentation fits in with the larger narrative of fertility control exerted by the *maquiladoras*, which at the time Gaspar de Alba was writing commonly required employees "to show bloody tampons or menstrual pads to the factory nurse each month to prove they [were] not pregnant" ("Poor Brown Female" 64). During her investigative process, Ivon notes that pregnancy provides a potential economic disruption to the preference of the *maquiladoras* for women, an employment habit which Elvia Arriola pins upon "a hybrid of stereotypes based on sex, race, and class" that portrayed Mexican women as "not only more docile and passive… but submissive, easily trainable, and unlikely to pose problems with union organization" (31).

It's noteworthy that Gaspar de Alba changed the Egyptian's name, as well as tying him to an entirely fictional subplot, given how many other details remain unmodified. The slight changes to Sharif's name and biography, and his involvement with the reproductive manipulations committed by the *maquiladoras*, dramatically alter the symbolic resonance of his character. When Ivon and Ximena first meet Elsa, the latter claims that her son Jorgito – whom Ivon will later adopt – resulted from an immaculate conception, and she was a virgin at the time of his birth. While Ivon traces Jorgito's paternity to Dr. Amen's insemination, the oddly Christlike symbolism remains, enhanced by two other elements: the religious connotations of the name "Dr. Amen" and the prominence of the Virgin Mary in the theology of Mexico, a predominantly Catholic country.

In "Poor Brown Female," Gaspar de Alba documents the "Tres Marias" syndrome that she claims dominates Mexican womanhood. Under the syndrome, all women are required to fit one of three Biblically-prescribed roles: Mary the Mother, Mary the Virgin, or Mary the Prostitute (81-2). As the sympathetic priest Father Francis notes, "the social context for the crimes… is, ultimately, a Catholic context, you see?" (252) The messianic symbolism is intensified by the fact that Ivon chooses to adopt Jorgito despite discovering that his biological father is a rapist and a convicted murder, suggesting an optimistic element to the irresolution of the conspiracy: Jorgito will be resurrected through the love and tolerance of his new family, scion of a new border culture that eschews the patriarchal violence of the old. As Volk and Schlotterbeck note, Ivon is the keystone in "her own gynocentric community inhabited by borderlands women who have 'unlearned the *puta/virgen* dichotomy'" (146), and while he may be a fairly minor plot point, the fact that Jorgito will be raised within that community is the element of the novel that shows the greatest promise of positive change.

But Gaspar de Alba's rhetorical strategy of mingling fictional and nonfictional elements sometimes runs the risk of weakening its more research-based content through the contrast between the implausible-but-true and the purely fictional. Late in the novel, Pete McCuts points Ivon to a map in the El Paso police station showing more than six hundred high-level sex offenders living "in the streets closest to the bridge, in the alleys of St. Vrain and Chihuahua and Kansas Streets… an entire neighborhood of habituals who could easily walk

across the Santa Fe bridge and ply their trade on the poor young women in Juárez" (273). The discovery that an unusual number of high-level offenders from outside the area are being resettled in El Paso surprises Ivon, but the character who informs her asks rhetorically, "isn't the border the dumping ground for all forms of pollution?" (310). Later, when Ivon forms her thesis about the large-scale conspiracy against infiltration of the U.S. by brown women, the sex offenders play a major role.

But while it's placed next to overtly fictional material, the concentration of sex offenders in El Paso – mostly from other counties of origin – was not an invention. In "Poor Brown Woman," Gaspar de Alba points out that she observed a map identical to the one Villa sees, and that a large concentration lived near the city's major crossing point. She asserts that the concentration of sex offenders is "part of the toxic fallout of [NAFTA], another type of vigilante army, like the Minutemen Project, working against the infiltration of the porous border by fertile brown female bodies" (76).

There are several problems with the sex offender theory, one of which is raised by a character in *Desert Blood*: the offenders aren't allowed to cross the border and would be arrested if they tried, as they wear monitoring bracelets and their names have been provided to border control agents. Gaspar de Alba rebuts her character's objection in "Poor Brown Woman" by asking, "To what degree, I wonder, do U.S. immigration officials ignore or patently condone this illegal crossing of registered sex offenders, thus aiding and abetting their crimes?" (75).

This response stems more from paranoia and hypothetical assumptions than from anything verifiable. It is also structured around circular logic, since the phrasing of the question assumes that the sex offenders *are* committing additional crimes, so if the existence of such crimes would require collusion from the authorities in ignoring bracelet monitoring and offender lists, the authorities must be ignoring those things. As such, it functions better in a fictional world where it's been established that the men patrolling the border also run sites where women are murdered on the Internet. Thus a representation of the greatest drawback to Gaspar de Alba's polemical method in *Desert Blood*, which is the confusion of different types of truth claims at moments when a scene's power derives from its adherence to literal facts.

It should be noted as well that Gaspar de Alba's ideological perspective, while it lends the novel focus and intensity, also pushes her on at least one occasion into distorting the facts in a way that shows no adherence even to indirect truth. In one sequence a character watches special prosecutor Dorinda Saènz, likely a fictional analogue of controversial official Suly Ponce, having a televised argument with activist Paula del Río, reminiscent of Casa Amiga founder Esther Chávez Cano. The two act as a stand-in for the larger conversation between activists and the government. At one point Saènz accuses feminist commentators of "[thinking] it's always about patriarchy" and "using these people and the tragic loss of their daughters to push their feminist agendas" (323). Del Río responds that

> Were these crimes happening to men, were men being kidnapped, raped, mutilated and dismembered, no matter what their class, we would already know the answers to the question of 'Who is killing the women of Juárez?' The authorities would not be wasting their time doing interviews. They would be out on the streets hunting the killers. (323)

What's troubling about that statement is its total inaccuracy. As Bowden and Molloy have noted, ten times as many men *were* being kidnapped and killed during the same period and their killers had the same level of impunity. So while patriarchy is certainly a major component of the environment surrounding the murders and Saènz is wrong in condemning the work of anti-femicide activists, del Río bears out Bowden's criticism that the attention given to the femicides obscured equally serious and more prevalent types of crime. Of course the sentence is attributed to a minor character, but given Gaspar de Alba's admiration for Chavez and her ties to the feminist community it's odd that she would so drastically undermine del Río's credibility on purpose. So the fact that the scene ends with a man being shot to death in front of his own home by killers who are never identified seems more like an accidental irony than a deliberate one.

It's a thought-provoking example, however, since its flat untruth further illuminates the shades of direct and indirect truth which make *Desert Blood* such an otherwise intriguing text. In writing a history of the femicides, Gaspar de Alba explores many different facts of Juárez and the femicides, exposing the ways in

which sexual exploitation, American anti-immigrant sentiment, and the abusive conditions in American-owned factories all work together (with or without deliberate collusion) to create conditions in which a number of women will be horrifically murdered by men who go unpunished. By spotlighting American responsibility for the crimes, and rooting their meaning in economic domination and anti-Hispanic bigotry, her history inverts the moral order assumed by an American audience, changing the meaning of an event which such groups would normally see as exemplary of Mexican corruption and lawlessness. The border qualities of Ivon's sexual and ethnic identities are advantageous here in several ways, since they metaphorically illuminate the homogenizing impulses underlying the murders, helping her to rewrite the femicides in a provocative and unsettling manner.

Chapter 3

The Banality of Evil in *2666*

Although unfinished at the time of his death, Robert Bolaño's *2666* runs to almost nine hundred pages of densely-packed text in the English version, more than three times as long as *Desert Blood* or *If I Die in Juárez*. It also covers a wider subject area, with scenes not only in Juárez but also in the United States and a number of European cities, and narrates a span of time stretching from the aftermath of World War I to the end of the Twentieth Century. Its analysis moves in an opposite direction from the other two novels: whereas *Desert Blood* and *If I Die in Juárez* examine the context around the femicides as a way of understanding them, *2666* examines the femicides as a way of understanding their broader context. That is, by considering the femicides relative to Mexican society and then examining that relationship in the light of other historical atrocities, it seeks to advance an understanding of the forces which underlie all such events and how those forces are built into human nature.

As counterhistory, then, *2666* functions somewhat differently than the other two novels. I'll say more about this later, but while *Desert Blood* uses its protagonist to situate itself within a particular ideological stance and *If I Die in Juárez* seeks to uncover the experiences of a subset of the community, *2666* avoids clear identification with any group or ideology. Instead it takes a broader

approach which falls in line with David Biale's ideas about a counterhistory which

> finds the truth in a subterranean tradition that must be brought to light, much as the apocalyptic thinker decodes an ancient prophecy.... Where the revisionist proposes a new theory or finds new facts, the counter-historian transvalues old ones. He or she recognizes the "mainstream" or "official" history but holds that the vital force behind that history lies in a secret tradition. (131)

Relative to my own argument, I should point out that I've been making somewhat liberal use of Biale's concept of secret or subterranean tradition, transvaluing it to apply to the broadened ideas of counterhistory developed by other critics. For instance, if *Things Fall Apart* is a counterhistory as per Edna Aizenberg, then the subterranean tradition it invokes is the suppressed cultural vitality of precolonial Africa. But Bolaño's reading functions in a different sense. He examines violence on both macro and micro scales (for instance, Nazi mass executions versus two academics beating up a cab driver) and finds the hidden traditions tying them together, advancing a unifying theory of human evil.

This doesn't mean Bolaño's novel lacks an adversarial stance, since it contains a vicious critique of the corruption and incompetence of every level of authority in Juárez. In this way it is thematically close to Duarte and Gaspar de Alba's work. But the novel's outward focus and relative ideological neutrality may partly explain its omission from some academic writing about the femicides.

2666 has attracted more attention in mainstream outlets than any other novel written about the femicides; for example the *New York Times* named it one of the ten best books of 2008, and Stephen King put it on his 2009 Top Ten list for *Entertainment Weekly*. Neither are guarantees of quality, of course, but the combination indicates cultural momentum at what might (perhaps problematically) be called high and low levels of literary sophistication. So if the goal of *Desert Blood* was, as per Gaspar de Alba's introduction, "to expose the horrors of this deadly crime wave as broadly as possible to the English-speaking public" (vi), then *2666* has realized the same ambition in a much more effective way. Yet *2666* is the only femicide-centered novel which isn't listed in the bibliography in *Making a Killing*. Likewise, Steven S. Volk and Marian E. Schlotterbeck's survey of femicide-related popular culture fails to mention Bolaño, despite a brief discussion of *Desert Blood* and an extended foray into Carlos Fuentes's *The Crystal Frontier*, which involves *maquiladora* culture but was published too early to deal with the murders.

On a basic level, *2666* may have been overlooked partly because it deals with murders in the fictional city of Santa Teresa, not in Juárez per se. Santa Teresa is an example of what Myrna Solotorevsky calls a pseudo-real referent, as distinguished from a real referent. According to Solotorevsky, a real referent is something which exists in the non-fictional world while a pseudo-real referent is a fictional counterpart which "spring[s] from the text and does not escape the fictionality that encompasses the referents [and] the depicted world…" (250).

According to Solotorevsky, the use of pseudo-real referents is a key technique in Bolaño's work. At the risk of digressing from my ideas about Bolaño's central argument, it's worth thinking about the ways *2666* uses pseudo-real referents since its aesthetic effect relies upon the contrast between things which do and do not have counterparts outside its fictional world.

For a text so large and sprawling, *2666* expresses its ideas in a compressed fashion which relies upon a reader's familiarity with the world outside the novel, often by using pseudo-real referents from literature. *2666* refers to dozens of external authors and texts in many different media, frequently with little explanation to help the reader derive meaning from the allusion. For example, when the journalist Quincy "Fate" Williams travels to Santa Teresa, his hotel clerk directs him to a café named Fire Walk With Me. Fate responds that the name "sounds like the title of a David Lynch film," to which the clerk responds that Mexico is "a collage of diverse and wide-ranging homages.... 'Every single thing in this country is an homage to everything in the world, even the things that haven't happened yet'" (339). The two have a brief conversation about David Lynch, not presented in dialogue, and the clerk asserts that Lynch's best work is the TV series *Twin Peaks*. Neither the characters nor the narrator acknowledge that the film *Fire Walk With Me* is a prequel to *Twin Peaks*, nor that the series' title city was plagued by a metaphysical evil of uncertain nature whose main symptom was the torture, rape, and murder of young women. That description also applies to Santa Teresa, making a Lynch homage not just of the café but of

the entire city. The connection is fluid, open to interpretation, and meaningless to someone unfamiliar with *Twin Peak*s, yet it smacks of layers of hidden import.

Bolaño is often similarly vague about the lives of his characters, hinting at backstories and resolutions that are never given, or pushing them into unexpected behavior that is never quite explained: See, for instance, the unexplained references to the "strange and spectacular accident" which crippled the Italian critic Piero Morini (6) or the stories about the brutality of English critic Liz Norton's first husband (35). But whereas literary and cinematic references provide an inter-text that lends the text deeper meaning, the characters who exist only in the pages of *2666* are shadowed from the light of further research. The unresolved questions around them are important since one of the broad themes of *2666* is the nature of mystery, particularly unresolvable mysteries and mysteries whose resolution is illusory. For instance, the crimes detailed in the fourth section are in some sense an unresolvable mystery since most of the killers are never identified. And yet, as I will argue in more detail later, knowing their identities would in fact be an illusory resolution, since the import of the crimes is in the statement they make about a broader social context. Similarly, the four critics in the first section strive to learn the identity of the reclusive author Benno von Archmboldi, and yet the discovery of his real name proves anticlimactic and meaningless. So the fictionality of characters is used to create micro-level unresolvabilities for the reader, thereby questioning the nature of resolution itself. It may be tantalizing to wonder how Morini was disabled or how Liz was troubled

by her husband, but it's uncertain how knowing the answers would illuminate their actions within the plot. In a later moment Archimboldi claims to have named himself in tribute to Benito Juárez, the real-life namesake of Ciudad Juárez, another reference which depends on outside knowledge and which disguises meaningless coincidence as meaningful revelation. So Juárez's status as a pseudo-real referent makes it function differently from Liz or Morini, since Santa Teresa has a very distinct counterpart in the nonfictional world, and part of its purpose is to comment upon that counterpart.

Nevertheless, Santa Teresa's fictionality doesn't eliminate the many ways in which it resembles Juárez, and the ways in which the murders documented in *2666* are similar to the murders that took place there. Indeed, an obsession with detail is one of Bolaño's main writerly strategies, and that detail helps establish the real-world link. The book's longest section, "The Part About the Crimes," intercuts vignettes of investigators, prisoners, journalists, government officials, and other local figures with descriptions of a large number of murders (one hundred and seven by my count – likely not an arbitrary number since the section closes at the end of 1997, and Grupo Ocho de Marzo claims that 107 bodies were found between 1993 and 1997 (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 296)). The act of killing is never described; instead, the reader is informed of the discovery of the aftermath, always framed in the driest journalistic language:

> In September, another dead woman was found, this time in a car in the Buenavista subdivision, past Colonia Lindavista.... The

> woman was wearing a white dress and she was barefoot. She was about five foot seven. There were three cheap rings on her left hand, on the index finger, middle finger, and ring finger. On her right hand she was wearing a couple of bracelets and two big rings with fake stones. According to the medical examiner's report, she had been vaginally and anally raped and then strangled. (389-90)

The detailing combines with the tone of journalistic neutrality and the absence of speculation to serve as a reminder that Bolaño is addressing a set of real-life crimes, identical in violence and grotesqueness to the ones in his novel. Detail is also central to his argument since Bolaño builds gradually to a sense of the injustice behind the behavior of the Santa Teresan authorities by piling on specifics. Saying that one hundred and seven bodies were found between 1993 and 1997 is less striking than making the reader sit through one hundred and seven dryly horrific descriptions of the crime scenes. Fleeting and unremarked as they tend to be given the lack of an organizing or commenting perspective, the moments portraying the corruption, apathy, and incompetence of the Santa Teresan authorities have a similarly cumulative effect. To pull just a few of many: a journalist reporting on the murders is herself killed, and "the ballistic analysis, which was never made public was later lost for good somewhere in transit" (356); a woman is found beaten nearly to death, and the medics who finally respond refuse to treat her until they know who will pay (357); a factory executive bribes a police officer to make a woman's body disappear with as little fuss as possible

(359); a murder suspect flees to the United States and "oddly enough, no *coyote* or *pollero* who might have helped him cross over was questioned" (390); a woman is found dead and "the medical examiner's report stated that the cause of death was strangulation, after the victim had been raped countless times," yet "the report of Inspector Ángel Fernández, who took charge of the case, indicated, on the contrary, that the cause of death was alcohol poisoning" (460); et cetera, ad nauseum. But while it's easy to pull examples out of the text, it's difficult to convey the sheer volume of information in which these key ideas are buried.

So the correlation between the number of bodies in the Ocho de Marzo estimate and the number detailed in "The Part About the Crimes" becomes important in understanding Bolaño's statement about the killings, since many of the women's deaths are far from mysterious: They are killed in fits of rage by jealous lovers and dissatisfied johns, killed in drunken fistfights with male friends, killed for investigating other killings. The text suggests that the majority of the killings go unpunished not because of grand conspiracy, *Desert Blood* style, but rather a police force unwilling or unable to rein in the violence implicit in human nature. A common thread of "serial killer-ish" ritual mutilations does emerge, involving severing of breasts and nipples, but not until more than a third of the bodies have been discovered, and paradoxically these injuries become a way of rationalizing the killings: after three women have turned up with their breasts mutilated, a police inspector suggests that "he began by raping and strangling, which is what you might call a normal way to kill. When he wasn't

caught, his murders became more personalized. The monster was unleashed. Now each crime bears his personal signature" (471). This is a perspective that can't be completely accurate since the murders are clearly the work of multiple killers. In this regard Bolaño echoes the perspectives of Bowden and Molloy, framing an escalation in the murders as a product of general lawlessness and impunity, with unpunished violence suggesting an opening for further violence, and the narrative of a serial killer being a convenient way for the government to avoid facing much more fundamental levels of social and institutional dysfunction.

Mixed in with the incompetence and apathy of the police force is a repeated undercurrent of misogyny that occasionally bursts into full view, often producing the ugliest passages in a book laden with ugliness. After two prostitutes are arrested for murder, twenty police pile into their cell and have a "party" involving gang-rape of the suspects, against whom there is "no proof they were guilty, except for their presence at La Riviera at the time of events" (401). A group of police meet at a coffee shop to celebrate the end of their shift, and tell a long string of misogynistic jokes that quickly descends from clichés of patriarchy ("Why don't women know how to ski? Silence. *Pues* because it never snows in the kitchen" (552)) to a more general sort of degradation ("What's the definition of a woman? Silence. And the answer: *pues* a vagina surrounded by a more or less organized bunch of cells" (552)) to irrational hostility ("women are like laws, they were made to be broken" (553)). One character ponders in response "how much of God's truth lay hidden in ordinary jokes," a thought that remains unvoiced but

is nevertheless approved by colleagues who have "*glimpsed* his words, the words the inspector meant to utter, as if they were wetbacks lost in the desert and they had *glimpsed* an oasis or a town or a pack of wild horses" (553). It's fair to assume that the refusal to adequately investigate the murders comes not only from a lack of resources but also a hatred for women which, given its predominance among the police, likely exists in broader Juárez society as well.

But the misogyny of the police is so striking that it's easy to miss the ways in which more subtle faults can be equally harmful. In the first section of the novel the French critic Jean-Claude Pelletier and the Spanish critic Manuel Espinoza have a civil, nonviolent rivalry for the affections of the British critic Liz Norton. Pelletier has quietly noted Espinoza's misogyny and suppressed rage elsewhere in the novel, both of which tend to come up at absurd moments: Discussing an unnamed Japanese horror film, Espinoza goes into a profane rant against two of the female characters, asking "Shut up, you cunt, what's so funny?... Does it make you come telling the story of a dead boy, you imaginary dick-sucking bitch?" (30-1). When the two critics find themselves journeying with Norton to Santa Teresa, where she tells them that she has decided to spurn them both in favor of the Morini, their reactions are opposite: Pelletier spends days sitting in the hotel's lobby re-reading Archimboldi, while Espinoza goes into the city and seduces a teenage carpet vendor whom he eventually abandons, despite promises to the contrary. Neither critic is capable of meaningful action when faced with the book's core evil; in that sense Pelletier's indifference and his

retreat into literature are every bit as monstrous as Espinoza's casual manipulation and abandonment of the carpet vendor. The dual incrimination of both characters crosses cultural and geographic barriers, lending complexity to an argument that might otherwise edge close to the reductive assertion that Spanish-speaking cultures hate women. The comparison between Pelletier and Espinoza suggests the beginnings of a universal commentary that will fully emerge in the last section.

The fifth and final section is structured by the journey of Hans Reiter, beginning at his birth and following him through childhood, service in the German Army during World War II, the illness and death of his wife, and the beginning of his writing career under the pen name Benno von Archimboldi. During the aftermath of his service, when Reiter wanders through the postwar ruins of Eastern Europe, he hears the story of Leo Sammer, a low-level Nazi bureaucrat whose history provides a key to interpreting Bolaño's theses about both Juárez/Santa Teresa and evil more generally.

I should point out that the introduction of Nazism and Holocaust imagery opens up an interpretive minefield of the highest order, introducing the possibility for every kind of offensively reductive comparison, and the possibility that Bolaño might be comparing the femicides to the Holocaust reeks of self-defeating hyperbole, an automatic disqualification of the seriousness and texture of either the argument or the primary text. There's an equal danger in underplaying the comparison, pointing out that the Holocaust and the femicides have been

juxtaposed without fully questioning what kinds of meaning might be created by the juxtaposition. The trick is to determine the exact type of parallel most appropriate to draw, without overstating the correspondence.

Reiter first encounters Sammer while the two are being held as prisoners in the aftermath of the war. Sammer serves "not on the military battlefield but on the economic and political battlefield," working "as the assistant director of an organization responsible for supplying workers to the Reich," as part of the occupation force in a Polish town (751). After his son dies in combat Sammer copes by throwing himself into his work, rising in the occupation's ranks until he leads the occupational bureaucracy in a Polish backwater. He unexpectedly receives a trainload of five hundred Jews and has no idea what to do with them or where to put them; after all, "I ran a civil operation, not military or SS. I didn't have experts on the subject" (752). He tries at first to treat the captives humanely and put them to productive use, buying them bread with occupation funds and sending them out in broom-armed battalions to sweep the entire town. He even makes some effort to maintain their dignity, ordering the policemen under his command to keep the local boys from insulting them. But the factories of the Reich are only interested in Poles and Italian prisoners, leaving Sammer at a loss.

In time, Sammer realizes he has no way to support the Jews. A colleague suggests that "as a temporary measure, if we lent a pair of Jews to each peasant in the region, wouldn't that be a good idea?" (756) but Sammer rejects the proposal as illegal. Finally he receives a phone call from the Office of Jewish Affairs – "an

organization of whose existence I had previously been unaware" (758) – and is told there is no means available to get his prisoners to their intended destination of Auschwitz and his best option is to dispose of them. Without the resources and technology of a concentration camp, they must use the same tactic as the early SS, marching prisoners into the forest and shooting them. The effort erodes both his own mental health and that of his subordinates; before long, the soldiers and policemen are unable to perform execution duty, and Sammer is arming the packs of adolescent boys who play soccer in the streets.

Sammer's story is told engagingly enough, his initial efforts to protect and employ the Jews are appealing, and his sympathy for the townspeople is textured and thoughtful, so it's easy to forget the basic monstrousness of his deeds, even relative to the broader context of the Third Reich. Thus it's a shocking reminder when he proclaims at the end of the story, "I was a fair administrator. I did good things, guided by my instincts, and bad things, driven by the vicissitudes of war. But now the drunken Polish boys will open their mouths and say I ruined their childhoods.... Liquor ruined their childhoods! Soccer ruined their childhoods!" (767).

In his position as a distracted bureaucrat, driven to commit atrocity not by ideological commitment or concern over self-preservation but rather through a combination of self-centered career-mindedness combined with an absence of the moral strength required to even ponder resisting the broader currents that sweep his society toward evil, Sammer resembles nothing so much as the Adolf

Eichmann portrayed in Hannah Arendt's *The Banality of Evil*. I make the comparison here not to imply that Sammer is necessarily patterned after Eichmann or directly inspired by a reading of Arendt but rather because both texts describe and indict a similar pathology. Like Eichmann, Sammer commits his crimes in an environment in which social trends have inverted what, to an external observer, might seem to be normal morality; the prosecutors at Eichmann's trial struggled with the fact that

> their case rested on the assumption that the defendant, like all 'normal persons,' must have been aware of the criminal nature of his acts, and Eichmann was indeed normal insofar as he was 'no exception within the Nazi regime.' However, under the conditions of the Third Reich only 'exceptions' could be expected to react 'normally.' (Arendt 26-7).

Like Sammer, Eichmann struggled with the psychological strain of traditional executions; after a trip to the countryside to inspect the sites where Jews were being shot, he complained that "…young people are being made into sadists. How can one do that? Simply bang away at women and children? That is impossible. Our people will go mad or became insane, our own people" (qtd. in Arendt 88-9). Both men found themselves in a context in which human life and the tolls enacted upon human psychology by its taking became not a moral question but rather an administrative one. What's particularly telling is the sense of indignant self-pity expressed both by Sammer and Eichmann, the latter of whom claimed after his

arrest to have a "profound conviction that [he] must suffer for the acts of others" (qtd. in Arendt 248) and complained that "at the hour of my birth the Norn of misfortune, to spite the Norn of good fortune, was already spinning threads of grief and sorrow into my life" (qtd. in Arendt 27-8). No doubt many Nazis perpetrated atrocity with the same bureaucratic amorality as Eichmann, but he has become iconic of the type. I point to him because the substance of Arendt's argument – that the horrifying thing about Eichmann was "precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal" (276) – is the horrifying thing about Sammer and also the horrifying thing about Santa Teresa.

While Sammer and Eichmann both failed to challenge the consequences of broad and sweeping anti-Semitism, the various Sammers who inhabit the government and police force of Santa Teresa fail to stand against the surprising and disturbing ways in which sex and violence blur into each other. Bolaño portrays sexualized violence as lurking beneath the surface of all humanity and rising quickly in chaos or instability, with additional stimulus in Santa Teresa from the pervasiveness of violent patriarchal ideology. In Bolaño's world the often-dangerous conflation of sex and violence is one of the most fundamental features of the human condition, and no logical explanation is advanced for the connection. Like the misogyny carried overtly in Mexican culture and buried at a more subconscious level throughout European and American culture, it's axiomatic within the novel's psychology.

One of the major instances of this conflation occurs during the critics' trip to Santa Teresa. Several years prior, Norton, Pelletier, and Espinoza all take a cab ride together, discussing their relationship with Norton and their jealousy over her attraction to a new acquaintance who has been disrupting what is already a troubled situation. The cabbie, a recent immigrant from Pakistan, insults Norton's sexual morality, and the two male critics respond by pulling him out of the car and beating him nearly to death. Afterward,

> when they stopped kicking him they were sunk in the strangest calm of their lives. It was as if they'd finally had the ménage à trois they had so often dreamed of. Pelletier felt as if he had come. Espinoza felt the same, to a slightly different degree. Norton, who was staring at them without seeing them in the dark, seemed to have experienced multiple orgasms. (74)

When the three critics arrive in Santa Teresa, the driver of their cab from the airport is beaten savagely by hotel doormen in a dispute over tips. Pelletier's room shows further evidence of violence – a crescent-shaped chunk of the toilet bowl is missing, "as if someone had picked up another person who was already on the floor and smashed that person's head against the toilet" (111) – and the three of them have violent nightmares. The next day, however, Norton leads the two critics to her room and they collectively make love until five in the morning; though the narration doesn't make the connection explicitly, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that they're responding to the echoes of the Pakistani cabbie's beating

by re-enacting, in literal fashion, the sense of ménage à trois they experienced earlier.

Another scene blurring the boundaries between sex and violence occurs in the novel's fourth section, when Klaus Haas – Archimboldi's newphew, and a German stand-in for the real-life Sharif Sharif – observes one of his cellmates, Farfán, sexually assaulting another inmate named Gómez. The two reconcile after Gómez tries to kill Farfán with a shiv, developing a relationship which is disturbing in its intimacy and affection relative to its roots in prison rape. Bolaño addresses a similar scene in "Literature + Sickness = Sickness," an essay he published during the writing of *2666*, addressing the ways in which sex takes over the consciousness of the unfortunate, the desperate and the dying: "When people are dying the only thing they want to do is fuck. Fucking is the only thing people in jails and hospitals think about" (229). In the essay, Bolaño sketches a couple similar to Farfán and Gómez as an example that, in what he claims is a paraphrase of Victor Hugo, "atrocious low-lifes are able to experience a happy evil, a happy atrocity" (230). He then compares the two to the entire contemporary middle class, "people who are in all regards exactly equal (probably less violent and brave, but more prudent as discreet) to the two Mexican pistoleros who live out their love locked up in jail" (230).

The three scenes, two novelistic and one essayistic, illustrate several layers of Bolaño's point about Santa Teresa, including the looseness of the boundaries between violence and sex, which shift both situationally (Farfán and Gómez

suddenly experiencing a sexual situation where they expect a violent one) and ontologically (the critics questioning whether they have just experienced a sexual experience or a violent one); the assumption that in times of horror or crisis people will become sexuality obsessive; and the fact that in Bolaño's view the European bourgeoisie harbor the same tendencies, buried thinly beneath a veneer of false civility that produces a greater amount of surface-level order but no deeper moral authority. As a middle-class German immigrant, Klaus Haas bears that out further, since the narrative never makes it clear whether he was involved in killing any of the women, but once he goes to jail he quickly shows an attraction to violent crime.

Thus the banality of evil in Santa Teresa, a city afflicted with enough cardboard shacks and random *narco* killings to turn its entire population into prison inmates. In the second section, Fate overhears a conversation between a young student and FBI criminologist Albert Kessler. Kessler is presumably a thin fictionalization of Robert Ressler, the former FBI profiler who initially defended the Mexican police as "a pretty good operation and pretty good people in top spots" but later admitted his analysis was "caught up in the politics of the place.... Everything I did during one party was sort of scrapped completely by the next" (Rodriguez, Montané and Pulitzer 102-3, 170). Kessler lays out a theory of crime in which the only transgressions that count are the ones committed against those who live inside society, illustrated by pre-Civil War Virginians obsessing over a man who murders his wife while blissfully ignoring the brutal deaths of hundreds

of slaves, or the attention focused on a single murder by a Parisian knife-sharpener at the time when thousands were dying in the Paris Commune of 1871. To that number should be added the Jews whom the tamely Bourgeois Sammer executes while fretting about his son's death on the battlefield, and, according to Kessler, the murdered of Santa Teresa:

> I'll tell you three things I'm sure of: (a) everyone living in that city is outside of society, and everyone, I mean everyone, is like the ancient Christians in the Roman circus; (b) the crimes have different signatures; (c) the city seems to be booming, it seems to be moving ahead in some ineffable way, but the best thing would be for every last one of the people there to head out into the desert some night and cross the border. (267)

Francisco Goldman claims that, in *2666*, the various actors and narrators who travel to Santa Teresa are "propelled toward some unifying epiphany," but that "it seems appropriate that *2666*'s abrupt end leaves us short of whatever that epiphany might have been" (37). But while no individual character may be able to assemble the pieces into an epiphanic moment, the quote above provides a framework on which a perceptive reader can hang many of the scenes that come before and after: The positioning of the pseudo-real Santa Teresa, and its nonfictional counterpart Juárez, sit squarely within a larger tradition of human evil that runs straight through the Holocaust, stretches back to the dawn of what might perhaps be loosely called civilization, and is never far from view: as

Archimboldi notes, "Thanatos is the biggest tourist on earth" (894).

In a postscript to *2666*, Ignacio Echevarrìa points to a line in Bolaño's notes which indicates "a 'hidden center,' concealed beneath what might be considered the novel's 'physical center'" (896). Echevarrìa makes the obvious assumption that the physical center is Santa Teresa and suggests that the hidden center may relate to the year 2666, a number which appears nowhere in the text of the novel. He points to a line from Bolaño's novel Amulet where the narrator refers to an avenue as being "A forgotten cemetery in the year 2666, a forgotten cemetery under the eyelid of a corpse or an unborn child, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that tried so hard to forget one particular thing that it ended up forgetting everything else" (897). The image suggests a very abstract image of complete desolation, a vague apocalypse tied to a date more symbolic than literal. Relative to my own argument, what's intriguing about the apocalyptic undertones of Echevarrìa's postscript is the way they resonate with Biale's assertion that "apocalyptic literature may turn out to be one of the best examples of counter-historical polemic" (132). Though this may not reflect the precise intention of Bolaño's note, it's interesting to think of the hidden center in the context of Biale's idea of the secret tradition. If the hidden center of the events in Santa Teresa is the sexualized violence implicit in human nature, released at times of chaos or uncertainty, and afflicting those outside society, *2666* is a counterhistory tracking the progress of that hidden center. The upsurge in drug violence which occurred in Santa Teresa's real-life counterpart in the years after

Bolaño's death further suggests its unsettling accuracy as an apocalyptic prophecy.

Conclusion

In my introduction, I described three different versions of the idea of counterhistory, each overlapping the others while emphasizing some element that the others ignored or lacked entirely. Returning to the examples of counterhistorical literature listed in my introduction, I should point out that Aizenberg, Borda, and Roe did not cite Biale or Funkstein in their essays on literary counterhistory. In fact, none of those three authors pointed to any particular theorist to define the term, evidently assuming its meaning would be revealed by context and by the examples they describe. So it might be said that part of the job I've undertaken is to reconcile Biale and Funkstein not only with each other but also with those who transplanted counterhistory into literary criticism. Perhaps the femicide novels provide some means of drafting a unified theory of counterhistory, which in turn might be used to draft a unified theory of the femicide novel.

Of course, the work of unification is hampered somewhat by the fact that each of the three texts I address falls relatively neatly into one of the definitions given in the introduction. *If I Die in Juárez*, with its focus on documenting a subaltern perspective relative to the free-trade narratives of the American government and the derogatory stereotyping of the Mexican government, follows the pattern laid out by critics such as Aizenberg, Borda, and Roe. Formally speaking, its main distinction from counterhistories like *China Men* and *Things*

Fall Apart is its chronological closeness and cultural distance between author and subject. In this regard, Duarte approaches her material from an inverted standpoint relative to Achebe and Hong-Kingston. Where Achebe and Hong-Kingston dig up suppressed histories several generations removed from their own experiences, Duarte had the opportunity to directly interview and interact with the community she writes about. The chronological closeness shouldn't impact on the question of definition, since *If I Die in Juárez* still seeks to capture the experiences of a particular group in a chronologically-rooted way, as well as tracking, through the epilogue, the formation of their collective identity relative to historical events.

But there may be more to say about Duarte's relationship to the community she writes about. Where Achebe and Hong-Kingston work to define their own identity and heritage by enriching the story of groups or individuals whom they view as ancestors, Duarte approaches the poor women of Juárez from an othering perspective. Her approach to the material acknowledges, by definition, her privilege in class and nationality, since it is her status as a middle-class American which allows her to provide a voice for working-class Mexicans. Of course, Hong-Kingston and Achebe also experience power differentials relative to their subjects, since their material resources are greater and the hegemonic groups they write to are at least slightly more receptive (though there may still be tremendous amounts to be desired in both cases). And as a woman who grew up near the border speaking Spanish, Duarte shares many important

markers of identity with the women of Juárez. Perhaps if history is written by the winners, as the cliché goes, then the literary counterhistorian must occupy a dual role, holding enough status to be taken seriously within the discourse community while identifying, or at least sympathizing, with the group which has been disempowered by the same structures which provide that status.

Alicia Gaspar de Alba enjoys a similar relationship to her material, since her status as an academic gives her more social status and material advantage than many Americans, let alone the working poor of Juárez, yet she also identifies with the subaltern status of the border community and the lesbian community. In fact it could be argued that Gaspar de Alba handles this relationship in a more responsible fashion, since she filters her perspective through an author-like protagonist rather than hiding it behind transparent prose as Duarte does. But it's interesting to compare *If I Die in Juárez* to *Desert Blood* in terms of the multiple definitions of counterhistory, since the latter text lines up with Funkstein's ideas in both its overtly adversarial bent and its complex relationship with reality.

Having read *Desert Blood* cover-to-cover twice and reviewed multiple fragments in the course of writing about it, I've become increasingly uncomfortable with some aspects of Gaspar de Alba's approach. Her outright denial of the violence inflicted on men in Juárez is the most troubling, even if it stems from ignorance. The association of Internet pornography with the live broadcasting of murder is distortingly reductive and avoids or undermines the many worthwhile arguments about the deleteriousness of porn. Several of her

ideas are rooted in questionable argument: while it's regrettable that out-of-county sex offenders were housed near the border, she has no evidence that the assembly was deliberate, or that there were any failures in the safeguards designed to prevent them from leaving their own homes, let alone crossing the border. Paranoia is an unsettlingly powerful rhetorical tool, and its use in *Desert Blood* skirts irresponsible territory. The fictional form provides effective cover in this regard, since it shelters what might otherwise count as a distortion of reality. I admire the focus and viciousness of *Desert Blood*'s critique and the resourceful ways it interweaves fact and fiction, and I'm generally on board with its politics. But for better or worse it also threatens to bear out Funkstein's idea of counterhistory as so wrapped up in its polemical, adversarial goals that it creates an "inauthentic narrative" in which "reality does not shine through" (qtd. in Biale 130).

It's difficult to say where to fit *2666* into the patterns established by the other two novels, partly because its range is so much broader and its goals are so much more complex. In some sense it combines the counterhistorical goals of the other novels, but in another sense it moves beyond their agenda. Bolaño's critique of the government certainly shares Gaspar de Alba's adversarial quality, and both writers spend much of their time pondering the intersections of sex and violence, although Bolaño does so with unflinching neutrality while Gaspar de Alba uses her viewpoint character to express disgust and shock. Bolaño examines the lives of the working women whose desperation and poverty expose them to predation,

like Duarte and to a lesser extent Gaspar de Alba. Like the other authors, Bolaño writes from a position of relative privilege, since he was an established author when he wrote *2666* and living in the comparable security of Spain, but as an expatriate Mexican and native Spanish speaker he retains a sense of identification with the population of Juárez.

But Bolaño achieves all the goals listed above in the context of a much larger-scale examination of the hidden themes of human history. Given its juxtaposition of Juárez with images of large-scale death and destruction, and its connection of social and governmental trends there with the worst tyrannies of the past, it seems appropriate to take a cue from David Biale in calling it an apocalyptic prophecy which extracts the subterranean traditions of history – especially given the turn of events in the eight years since Bolaño's death. In terms of unifying threads and themes, then, the three novels share one goal: to document the events and the social and political context of the city of Juárez during the rise of anti-femicide activism, to do so in a way that challenges the narratives of those in power, and to use the artistic license of fiction to present an argument that is seamless, surprising, and emotionally compelling, a narrative which proposes answers where others may not and explores psychologies to which others are denied access.

On a final note, I should point out that while all good criticism opens up new areas of exploration, this thesis is particularly fortunate in that regard, for several reasons. All three novels are recently published, and relatively little

critical work has been done on them (or, in the case of *2666*, relatively little published in English-language journals). The idea of counterhistory in fiction is also on an upswing; the majority of critical articles I found while researching this essay had been published in the last fifteen years, and the majority of MLA directory listings related to counterhistory are dissertation abstracts from the last five. Finally and most bittersweetly, the unresolved nature of the femicides and the recent explosion of violence at the border both provide an opening for a great deal of further writing. If no other good comes of the tragedies there, hopefully other authors both from Mexico and other countries will continue to seek the form of understanding only fiction can provide.

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